

Value Enhanced Nutrition Assessment (VENA) in WIC

The First Step in Quality Nutrition Services

What is VENA?

VENA is a new initiative, developed jointly by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) and the National WIC Association (NWA), to improve nutrition services in the WIC Program by establishing standards for the assessment process used to determine WIC eligibility and to personalize nutrition education, referrals, and food package tailoring. VENA is part of the larger process known as Revitalizing Quality Nutrition Services (RQNS) in WIC.

Why is VENA Necessary?

VENA responds to the recommendation made in the 2002 Institute of Medicine report, *Dietary Assessment in the WIC Program*¹. In its report, the IOM recommended that all women and children ages 2 to 5 years who meet the eligibility requirements of income, category and residency status should also be presumed to meet the requirement of nutrition risk through the category of dietary risk based on *failure to meet Dietary Guidelines*. In addition, the IOM found that commonly used diet assessment methods do not accurately assess an individual's nutrient intake.

The IOM made clear in its recommendation that the intent was **not** to affect the current use of other nutrition risk criteria for eligibility determination. That is, information should continue to be collected for the identification of potentially serious nutrition risk factors, such as growth issues, iron deficiency, or predisposing medical conditions related to nutrition. Such information is required for the priority placement of participants, and to provide the necessary referrals and individualize other nutrition services.

As a result of the IOM report findings and recommendation for a presumed dietary risk criterion, FNS identified the need to develop comprehensive nutrition assessment policy and guidance. VENA will not only serve to enhance the nutrition services of the WIC program, but to ensure the integrity of the WIC Program as a premier public health nutrition program.

How will VENA Change WIC Assessment Procedures?

Until now, there were no clearly identified standards to assess the quality of WIC nutrition assessment protocols. VENA defines for all State and local WIC agencies the process and content of a quality and comprehensive WIC nutrition assessment upon which nutrition education, food package selection and referrals will be based. In addition, VENA identifies essential staff competencies necessary to conduct an

¹ Institute of Medicine; Committee on Dietary Risk Assessment in the WIC Program. Dietary risk assessment in the WIC program. Washington (DC): National Academy Press; 2002.

assessment. The diagram below highlights and summarizes the changes anticipated with the implementation of VENA.

Pre-VENA

Quality of assessment is inconsistent across WIC agencies. No comprehensive FNS nutrition assessment policy.

Use of diet histories (e.g., 24 hour recall, FFQ) to determine dietary risk.

Assessment information not always used effectively for nutrition services.

Primary function is for nutrition risk identification for eligibility determination.

No presumed dietary risk criterion.

Tendency to focus on deficiency findings.

Not always consistent with participant-centered nutrition services.

WIC Nutrition Assessment

Post-VENA

FNS provides policy for quality WIC nutrition assessment across all WIC agencies.

Discontinues use of diet histories (e.g., 24 hour recall, FFQ) to determine dietary risk.

Enhances nutrition assessment through improved process, content and staff skills.

Continues to identify nutrition risk(s), with more emphasis on using information to provide individualized nutrition services.

Inclusion of presumed dietary risk criterion.

Positive approach based on desired health goals rather than deficiencies.

Complements participant-centered nutrition services.

What are the Anticipated Results of VENA?

State agencies will:

- Receive policy, guidance and VENA training;
- Empower staff by improving their nutrition assessment skills; and
- Enjoy more satisfied staff and participants.

WIC staff will:

- Maximize their limited time to collect all relevant information to plan a personalized nutrition intervention;
- Use critical thinking skills to link assessment information to participant's needs and concerns;
- Engage the participant in dialogue and goal setting; and
- Weave nutrition and diet as a common thread throughout the assessment process.

WIC participants will:

- Experience a positive encounter;
- Receive information and services relevant to their needs and concerns; and
- Feel empowered in their personal goal setting to improve their health.